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ABSTRACT

A university writing faculty conducted a study of the concepts of unity in expository prose and of sentence structure as understood by Arabic, Malay, and Spanish speakers to discover why some students grasp some concepts more readily than others. Interviews, surveys, and analysis of written compositions revealed that the reason lies in ways these concepts are understood in other languages. Arabic speakers have difficulty grasping the role of the thesis as the organizing principle in English prose because the purpose of Arabic prose is to elaborate on an accepted viewpoint. Also, for Arabic speakers, a sentence consists of a number of independent clauses. Malays present and support a viewpoint in their essays; therefore, their writing conforms more closely to American standards of unity. The reasons seem to be Malay academic requirements for tightly organized essays and straightforward sentences and the tradition of politeness toward teachers which requires students to write well-organized essays. Like Americans, Latins write to defend a point of view, and they include a range of arguments. However, like Arabic speakers, they write serial sentences. These findings should generate more effective explanations of unity and sentence structure in English prose and an increased awareness of good writing in other languages. (MSE)

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Concepts of Unity and Sentence Structure in Arabic, Spanish, and Malay

In teaching expository writing to international students on the college level, we have often puzzled over two questions. Why do many students immediately grasp the importance of the thesis statement in English prose and the methods of organizing an essay with a thesis while others struggle more than half a semester to learn these concepts? And why do many students easily generate complete sentences in English while others consistently write, what are to us, run-on or serial sentences, no matter how much explanation we give of how to recognize and correct run-ons? From our experience, the answers to these questions do not lie in the relative intelligence of the writers or in their level of expertise in writing. The answers appear to be directly connected to the concepts of unity and sentence structure in their own languages.

In a year-long study, we have explored these concepts in the three language groups most widely represented at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte -- Arabic, Spanish, and Malay speakers. We have used three methods to determine these concepts:

(1) observation of student papers

(2) oral questioning of students in peer-tutoring situations as well as faculty-student conferences and

(3) the use of surveys and essay assignments on the writing backgrounds of our students and their perception of good writing in their own languages.

Our research has led to several observations and preliminary conclusions. First of all, students, who speak and write in Arabic or their native tongue, often

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have difficulty with a key aspect of the global coherence of English essays i.e. the role of the thesis as an organizing principle, while Spanish and Malay speakers have little or no difficulty with such coherence. The reason lies in the concept of unity for each language group. Arabic speakers typically "fail" to include thesis statements because they are unnecessary. According to Barbara Koch in her article "Presentation as Proof: The Language of Arabic Rhetoric," the essay's main points are already accepted by the reader. Thus, Arabic prose does not persuade the audience; it elaborates and embellishes "truths." Malay and Spanish speakers, in contrast, write in order to prove their thesis, in much the same way that American students are taught to present and support their views. For this reason, the function of the thesis in English is readily understood by Malay and Spanish speakers. A second concept of unity shapes sentence structure in the three languages. While Malay writers produce English sentences comparable in form and length to those of American writers, Arabic and Spanish speakers tend to write "expanded sentences," characterized by a series of independent clauses joined by commas and/or coordinating conjunctions. Such expansion is a direct result of the Arabic and Spanish students' sense of cohesion. For these writers, all of the independent clauses which pertain to a single topic cohere through their placement in one sentence. But for Malay speakers, other means of achieving cohesion are more prominent, resulting in separate sentences.

We have found that Malay students' essays conform rather closely to American standards of unity as well as to one purpose of American academic prose: to present and support the writer's point of view. These similarities may result from how writing is used in the Malaysian educational system and from the respect which students show their teachers.

Malay academic papers, especially those written for the senior high school current affairs course called the General Paper class, are narrowly focused essays on current events and cultures in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. A student is expected to study a variety of views on such topics as the advantages and disadvantages of working women, but her paper should explore her own opinion, expressed in a thesis statement. Unity is one criterion for this type of writing; thus a serious defect, which lowers the grade, is "going out of the topic." A second criterion is that students should evaluate and interpret information for themselves; according to our students, good writing never contains "all facts and none of your own thinking." At the same time, generalizations and interpretations should be supported. If a student writes "the land is not good for growing crops," the essay should "also state why and give the reason."

The requirements for good organization, which "keeps the reader from feeling bored," are also most explicit. Essays must have introductions, bodies and conclusions. One student specified that in a paper of four to five paragraphs, the first is the introduction, the second and third contain the main idea and details, and the last is the conclusion. In this "model" essay, "each paragraph should have about five sentences" (Ithnin). Malaysian students are also taught various organizational patterns--chronological, spatial, most to least important, and general to specific.

Two conditions seem to produce this Malay emphasis on narrowed theses and straightforward organizational patterns. The first is the system of national examinations which all Malaysian students must take if they continue beyond elementary school. University-bound students take three examinations, at ages 14, 16 and 18; if they successfully complete the last, they are permitted to apply

to one of the national universities (Vreeland 176-179). Produced and graded in Malaysia, these examinations all contain written essays. The explicit instruction on narrowing down a topic and adhering to standard organizational patterns seem to be strategies taught in response to these important examinations.

A second condition affecting Malay students' writing is rooted in their sociolinguistic background. The Malay language, like other Southeast Asian languages, (e.g. Thai, Burmese, Japanese), contains linguistic features to express the relative social positions of speaker and addressee. In these languages, politeness is conveyed by "reverse deixis(making the hearer the reference point)" (Becker 251). In classical Malay, allusion is one expression of politeness, "since direct statements are considered abrupt and impolite" (Vreeland 100). However, according to our students, academic writing in Malay is not allusive, but clear and to the point. Therefore, in their academic writing, politeness toward the teacher is expressed through a well-informed content and clear organization. As one student comments, "The organization of our paper is very important in such a way that the teacher will know what he/she is reading, what is going on and experience no loss in reading. Good organization of the paper makes the teacher interested and feel happy in reading it. He will not feel bored and continue reading it and make a clear conclusion from what he reads" (Abubakar). Such an attention to the audience's feelings while reading a paper distinguishes our Malay students from speakers of other languages.

Like Malay and North American writers, Latin students write to defend an individual point of view. In addition, they include in their papers the range of opinion on a topic and viewpoints other than the one they have chosen to defend.

Thus, their audience is similar to that for which American students write, one which is skeptical until the point of view is demonstrated to be valid. For example, in a paper comparing the Venezuelan dictatorship of 1948-58 with the subsequent, democratic government, the student presented the main characteristics of the dictatorship, both its abuses and its successes. As a result, he could "appreciate the fact that we could find out about the positive and negative aspects of both kinds of government. Probably, the students of that period never could investigate anything that was not on agreement with the government." Science papers can also demonstrate discrepancies. To obtain a Venezuelan license as an electronics engineer, one student wrote a paper reporting on a year-long research project in which he had to reconcile and explain the differences between a theoretical circuit and the actual one that he built.

In contrast to Malay, Spanish, and American essays, the writing of Arabic students is vastly different in its purpose and organization. In Arabic prose, both the writer and reader agree on the thesis of the essay; thus, the development of the topic precedes differently than in an essay in which the writer must persuade the reader of the validity of the thesis.

The purpose of Arabic prose is to elaborate one point of view by presenting the reader with many facts and/or quotations supporting that point of view. Thus, student writers expound one opinion; they are not expected to "confuse" the reader with alternative views on a topic. Because alternatives are not considered, the style of presentation in Arabic is fundamentally different from that found in American academic writing. The purpose of this rhetorical style is not to persuade the audience but to elegantly present universally accepted truths (Koch 53, 55). Such an elegance is not designed to persuade because there is no room for doubt. Audience and writer agree on the validity of a point of view even before an essay

is written. This is quite different from the purpose of American academic writing--to persuade the audience that the writer's opinion is valid. As Koch says, persuasion implies that there is doubt about the validity of a statement, and that the reader must be convinced by evidence (54). In contrast, Arabic prose does not admit doubt.

Connected to this perception of audience and the purpose for writing are the use of implicit thesis statements and the broad coverage of topics. Arabic students' papers often lack thesis sentences. In many cases, the thesis is implicit; since the writer and reader agree on the point being made, there is no need to state it explicitly. In other papers, the title or a word or phrase serve to present the topic of the paper, resulting in a kind of organization labeled "unity by term dominance" (Markels 44). In the essay outlined on the handout, "Islam as a way of life," the entire paper is organized around the naming of the topic, Islam. Furthermore, all sections are given equal emphasis, without subordination.

Unlike Malay, Latin, and North American students, who support their own opinions through the use of facts, Arabic students elaborate their topics either through a catalogue of information or through quotations from famous people, from the Prophet Mohammad's sayings or from the Koran.

Most of the essays described by our Arabic students are developed impersonally. Because they must present "received opinion" rather than personal opinion, they write on subjects from the past--the lives of famous poets, mathematicians or scientists--or on topics for which there is common knowledge between e.g. how to keep the family together as a unit, Islam as a way of life, or the relationship between science and religion. One student, however, who is a poet, described

some papers on personal topics, in which he did express his own feelings and opinions. Interestingly, these were all "imaginary" papers. One junior high science paper, intended to "increase the imaginary thinking about science," described "the scientific power he wished to have, and how he would use that power in a good or bad way." He imagined how he would behave "if he were the Electric Man," the personification of electricity. In another paper, a final examination essay for his philosophy class, he had to imagine that he found himself in a grave and then describe how he felt. These personal and imaginary topics are only developed in a context of unreality; it seems that personal opinion can comfortably be expressed only if it is removed from reality. Furthermore, these personal papers were rare, only discussed by one student whereas most academic papers written in Arabic were impersonal expressions of group consensus.

For Arabic speakers writing in English, the concept of the sentence differs from that of their American counterparts. Most strikingly, a sentence does not consist of one or two independent clauses extended by subordination where appropriate. Instead, a sentence consists of any number of independent clauses, visually joined by commas and at time coordinating conjunctions but more importantly connected by the overall topic of the sentence. Indeed, the treatment of one topic rather than grammatical structure governs the boundary of the sentence. Thus, one Arabic speaker writes:

> The road we were using was not stright so many turnes we had to do beside it wasn't completely smoth, in so many places, we had to aviod some of the rocks laying in the middle of the road, and sometimes to aviod pot holes (Ebrahim).

In this instance, the central topic of the sentence, the dangerous nature of the road, is clearly implied but not directly stated. In other instances, the sentence topic is clearly identified in the first independent clause:

> My way of living is going to be changed I will be a busy man in my work instead of my studies wake up to work and coming back from work earning money instead of getting money from my family having my own car and specially I will be having my own house and in that house I will be having a very important thing which is that my family (Arar).

In either case, whether the topic is directly stated or implied, the expanded sentence boundary works for cohesion as the logically connected clauses appear in one sentence. It is not surprising, then, that Arabic speakers have great difficulty replacing what they have learned about the clear expression of thought in one sentence with the "nonlogically" divided sentences that we, as writing teachers, encourage i.e. the separation of their sentence into two or more statements. For them, the sentence boundary is a major device for achieving cohesion within the paragraph.

Such a function is perceived by Spanish speakers as well. They, too, write serial sentences logically unified by topics, but their topics are most often stated in the sentence. One student writes, for example:

> But now, I have the big problem of my life, my father have been retired from his job and our currency has been devalued, so I needed to find a job or to get a scholarship, if not I must go back (Estrada).

The first clause announces the topic, the major problem faced, while succeeding information explains the causes and effects of this problem. For Spanish speakers, as for Arabic students, the correction of these run-ons results in what they perceive to be "disunity." To disrupt the sentence boundary, in their view, means a break-down of cohesion. Malay speakers, in contrast, place logically connected ideas in separate sentences:

> For those who enjoyed learning about history, Charleston is one of the best place. The Civil War was started at the Fort Sumter, Charleston. Until now, we could see the cannon, fort and other things which were left behind (Abdul Aziz).

Clearly, their sense of cohesion does not rely on sentence boundaries but on other methods for connecting sentences such as word repetition and chronological order. For this reason, a Malay student will seldom write a run-on sentence in English.

An understanding of Malay, Spanish, and Arabic concepts of unity and sentence structure has clear implication for American teachers of composition. On a practical level, this information should generate more effective explanations of unity and sentence structure in English prose. But perhaps more importantly, our exploration will increase awareness of what it means to write well in another language. The concepts of global coherence and cohesion (or local coherence) appear to be rhetorical universals, but the ways in which they are achieved may differ widely according to the culture and language background of the student.

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